

BEST FACE FORWARD

At Rooter-Man of Tampa Bay, well-stocked service trucks are keys to advertising, customer satisfaction, and employee pride and retention

By Erik Gunn

When Rodger Luebke and Peter Allard look at the fleet for their Rooter-Man franchise, they see a lot more than just a bunch of trucks. Those vehicles are the face of their business.

Trucks build brand awareness, says Allard, who went into business with Luebke just a year ago as co-owners of Rooter-Man of Tampa Bay, Fla.

After Yellow Pages and word-of-mouth referrals from happy customers, he believes, the best way for a plumbing service business to sell itself is by running highly visible, well-kept trucks.

"I believe in trucks as advertising," he says. "If you see a service truck that was all beat up and falling apart, would you really want them at your house? I take

some of my cost for the trucks and roll them over into my advertising budget."

Despite owning their Rooter-Man franchise for just a short time, Allard and Luebke have been growing the business aggressively, buying up more territory throughout Northwest Florida. Their laser-like focus on managing their fleet is critical to the operation's success.

Aggressive Growth

Allard and Luebke went into business together in August 2006 after both men met on the job at a plumbing and air conditioning consulting firm. The two looked around at franchise opportunities and ended up signing with Rooter-Man.

They started by buying an existing plumbing company in Pinellas County and the Rooter-Man franchise in Hillsboro and Pinellas counties, covering markets in Tampa Bay and Clearwater, with 3 million population (5 million in winter). By mid-2007 they had purchased a second plumbing company, and they have grown to some 20 franchise territories, making them one of the largest Rooter-Man operations in the country.

Previously, Allard had managed an 88-vehicle fleet for a plumbing company with \$14 million in annual sales. So he was already sold on the benefits of sharp-eyed fleet management. As he and Luebke grew their business, they replaced the existing vehicle fleet with new ones. "It's a 100 percent turnover fleet," Allard says.

The Rooter-Man of Tampa Bay fleet consists of five 15-foot Ford E-350 box trucks, two Ford F-150 pickup trucks, one Ford F-250 and one Dodge 2500. The E-350s are the backbone of the

operation and the vehicle of choice for service calls. Allard knows they may seem big for routine residential service calls, but he swears by them.

"Some people will say it's not economical," he says. "But for me to get a 15-foot rolling billboard, it's worth it. I don't spend as much on Yellow Pages. A tremendous number of people call and say, 'We saw your truck.' So I know it's working."

Big inventory

There's another advantage to the box-truck configuration. "They're carrying twice as much material as a standard cargo van would carry," Allard says. "So technicians can actually give the customer more options without running to a supply house."

Surveys confirm that a top concern for customers is for technicians to be on time, he observes. Having the right parts — and so being able to finish a job without interruption — ranks only a little bit behind. The larger trucks make it possible to meet that demand.

"We carry very little inventory in our facility," Allard says. "I let our vendors manage our inventory." Technicians submit lists of what they've used each day, and trucks get promptly restocked. "We have enough material in the truck



Technician Michael Gaudet cleans a line with a cable machine from Ridge Tool Co. (Photography by Don Haines)

PROFILE

ROOTER-MAN OF TAMPA BAY, FLA.

OWNERS:	Rodger Luebke and Peter Allard
FLEET:	9 service trucks
SERVICE AREA:	3,700 square miles in Northwest Florida
EMPLOYEES:	11
ANNUAL REVENUE:	\$2 million (2007 projected)
SPECIALTIES:	Drain cleaning, sewer and water line repair, leak location, waterjetting, plumbing repairs and maintenance
WEB SITE:	www.rootermantb.com



Attractive vehicles are important to the image of Rooter-Man of Tampa Bay, and they provide advertising value, as well.





Each technician at Rooter-Man of Tampa Bay is assigned a truck and is responsible for maintaining it. Here, technician Michael Gaudet makes sure his truck is clean for a new day.

to last them a week, but the reality is we're getting restocked every other day," Allard says.

The pickup trucks are used to haul additional equipment, deliver parts and support a second man on a job. The two vans, meanwhile, are the only vehicles left over from the acquisitions. Both have pipe racks and are for "second man" use, mainly on commercial jobs. They can carry 20-foot lengths of pipe. When these vans are replaced, it will be with

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Peter Allard

E-350 box trucks, and the pipe racks will be put on the pickup trucks instead.

The box trucks are equipped with wooden slats inside that allow shelves to be mounted quickly and conveniently. Originally, Allard had Rooter-Man's own shop outfit the trucks with custom shelving, but he has begun ordering shelving packages from American Van. He now keeps an extra shelving set on hand so that a new truck can be outfitted without delay.

Equipped for work

Each box truck is outfitted with the same complement of equipment: A RIDGID K-60 sectional cable machine, 150 feet of 7/8-inch cable, 125 feet of 5/8-inch cable, and a full set of sewer heads for drain cleaning. In addition, the trucks have a RIDGID battery-operated Mini-SeeSnake camera with Scout locators.

"We offer a free camera inspection on any mainline stoppage that we do," Allard says. "We'll not only clear it but we'll take a look at it to see what your problems are. There's a tremendous amount of root penetration in Florida."

Hitachi and Bosch small demolition hammers round out the equipment list on each truck, along with other tools such as wet-dry vacuums, reciprocating saws, other small power tools, and small power converters. The power converters aren't used to run machinery — they provide power for devices such as laptop computers and tool battery chargers. Yes, those could be charged using truck batteries, but Allard doesn't like the idea. "I'm just concerned with eating the batteries up," he says.

One of the box trucks has been outfitted as a "commercial cruiser" for an Emergency Response program the company is starting with commercial customers. In addition to what the other trucks carry, it hauls a 4.5 kW generator.

Additional equipment includes one US Jetting trailer-mounted jetter (4,000 psi/17 gpm). "Knock on wood, we haven't needed two at the same time, but it's in our budget to buy another one," Allard says.

Care and feeding

The entire fleet is decorated uniformly: crisp white background and sharp lettering with the red and blue Rooter-Man logo. To build employee pride in the fleet, each technician is assigned a vehicle, personalized with his name.

"When a technician comes onboard with me, first Roger and I go through the truck inventory," Allard says. "Then I call the graphics company and have their name printed up on it. They feel, 'This is my vehicle.' They take it home and they truly feel that this is their truck."

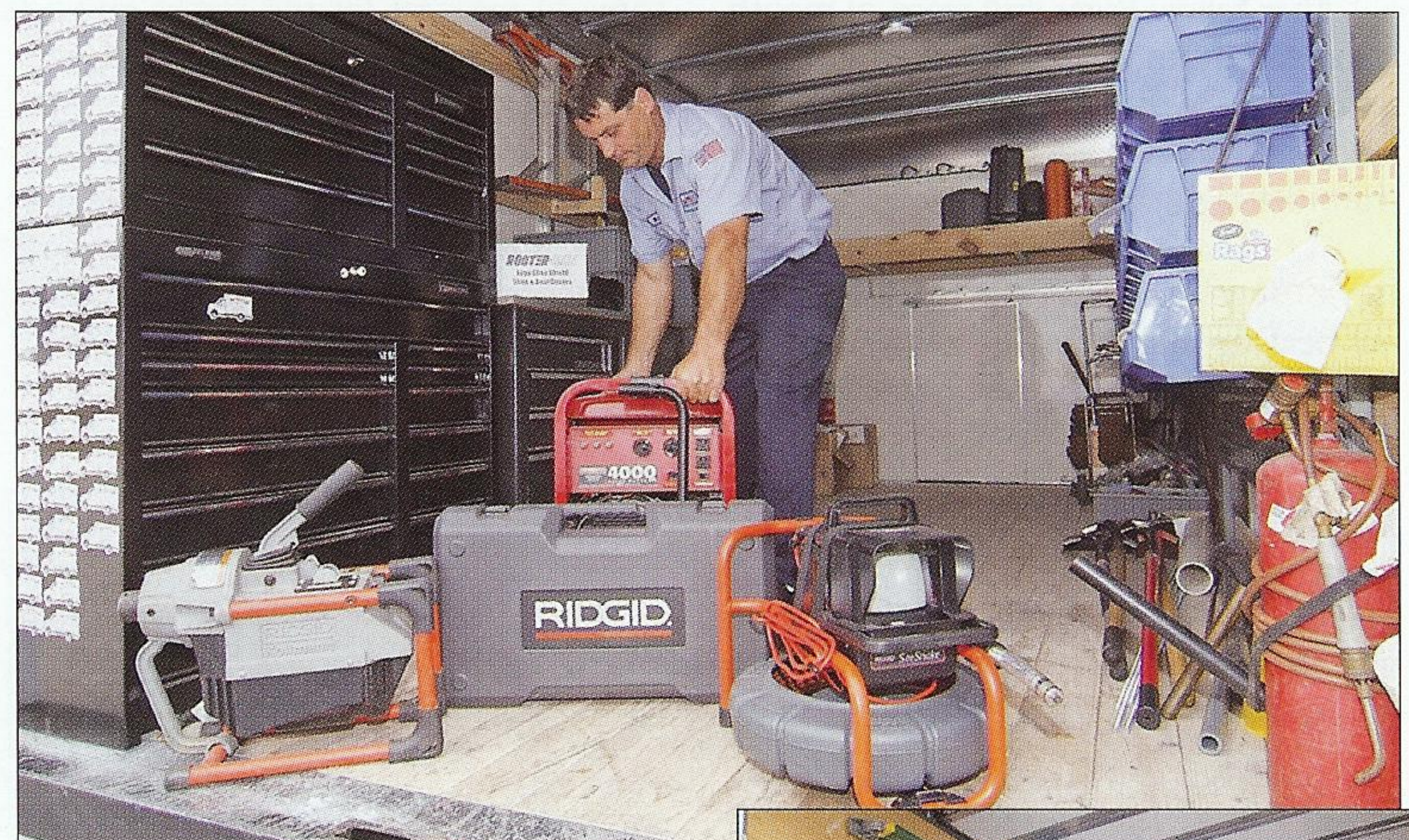
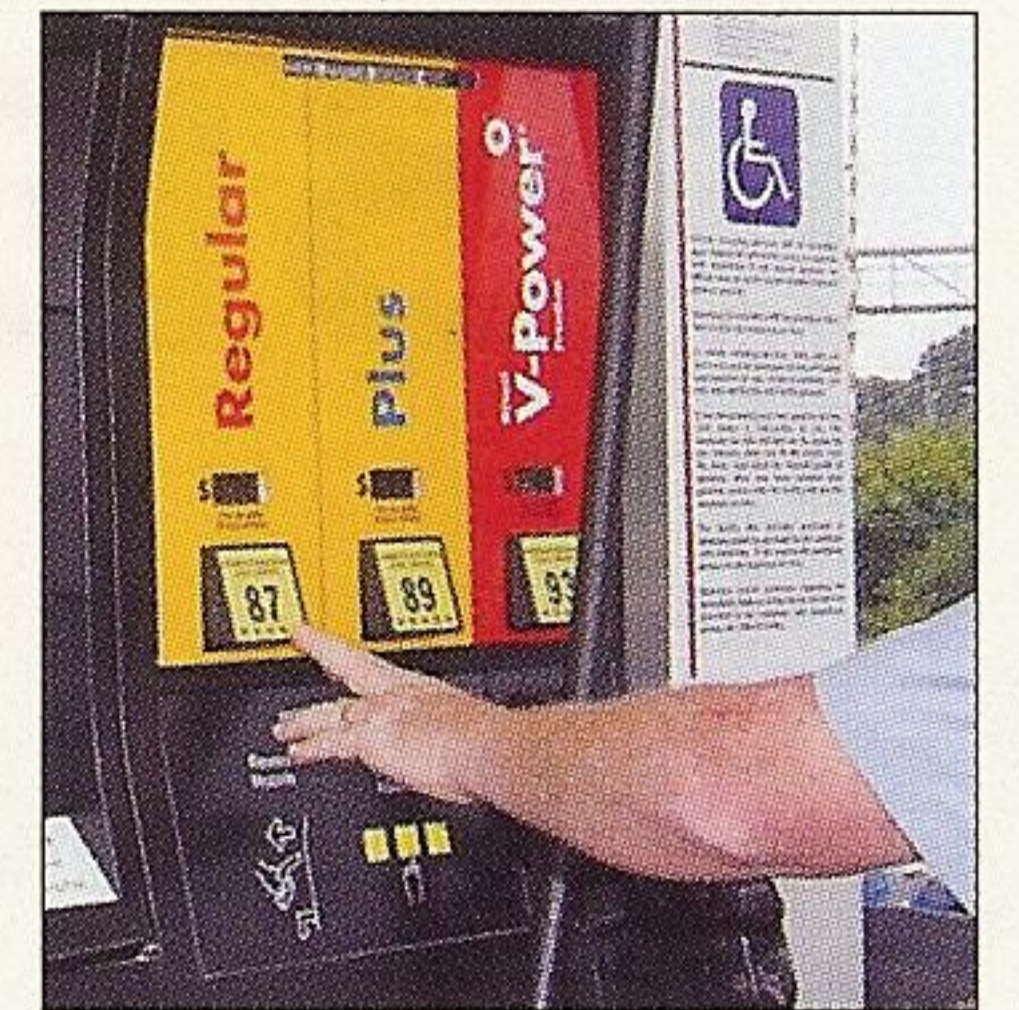
That helps promote compliance with another policy at the firm. "Our technicians have to wash them once a week and wax them once a month," says

Burning Money

With the current cost of fuel, Rooter-Man of Tampa Bay has sacrificed on one point as it manages its growing fleet of vehicles. Its trucks run on regular, 87-octane gasoline. Co-owner Peter Allard, whose responsibilities include managing the company's nine-vehicle fleet, would prefer to use a higher-octane, midgrade formula, but he doesn't feel it's affordable in the current climate.

"Our biggest challenge now that a lot of small businesses are facing is the price of gas," Allard observes. "There's not a lot you can do. We try to keep dispatches as close as possible, but in our business it can be tough to do that."

Many business analysts suggest that one way for companies with a big motor fuel bill to recoup those costs is to add fuel surcharges. Allard is reluctant to go that route. "I put myself in my customer's shoes and think, How would I feel?" he says. "I probably wouldn't like it. If you're going to do that, you might as well increase your prices."



The Rooter-Man of Tampa Bay service trucks are well stocked with supplies and with pipe cleaning and inspection tools so that technicians have what they need for nearly every job.

Allard. They can do that at the Rooter-Man facility, which is equipped with a soft-water power washer and a huge wash brush. Most do the washing at home, though.

At Monday morning meetings, Allard inspects each truck and gives out a Cleanest Truck award. "What usually gets it is Armor All," he says with a chuckle. "All the trucks are clean, and the one that's got fresh Armor All on the tires, that's the one that gets it." Allard gives the winner a \$20 bill. "My guys know that Monday morning they'd better have a clean truck or they're going to have to stay and clean it."

Employees seem to appreciate the vehicles for which they take so much responsibility. The big box trucks are especially popular. "The guys love 'em," Allard says. "I'll hire somebody that's been in an extended van their whole career and they'll get in one of these and say, 'That's it.' They'll stay just because of that truck!"

More to come

For maintenance, Rooter-Man of Tampa Bay has a standing arrangement with a local franchise where Allard knows the manager. "The whole system



is computerized," he says. "When my trucks go in there, they know exactly what type of routine maintenance should be done on it, at what mileage."

They receive an oil change and tire rotation every 5,000 miles. They are slated to be replaced at about 120,000 miles — every four or five years or so. The way things are going, though, Allard and Luebke are likely to be buying more trucks than just the replacement vehicles.

Rooter-Man of Tampa Bay is on track for steady growth. "I see us growing at least 25 to 30 percent, year in and year out," Allard says. The company plans to grow mainly by building new business instead of acquiring more territories. And that means its fleet will grow as well.

Allard wants to grow at a measured pace and takes that same approach in building the fleet. "We probably could grow by another three trucks right now," he says. "But we're taking it slow." ■